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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the challenges of identifying gifted students from underrepresented or special populations. Reasons for underrepresentation of students from special populations are reviewed and include biases in standardized testing, underreferral of students from diverse cultural and ethnic groups to gifted programs by teachers, and the traditional focus on students' deficiencies rather than on students' strengths. Problems inherent in the identification of gifted students with specific physical disabilities and students with learning disabilities are also addressed, and include language impairments that create barriers to verbal testing, stereotypical expectations about gifted children, delays in specific developmental disabilities that are often used as indicators of giftedness, incomplete information about the child which limits the view of the child's potential, and lack of opportunity to display talents. Educators are urged to address three areas that relate to recognizing talent in students with physical and learning disabilities, including the difficulty in expressing and recognizing talent, the effect of the classroom atmosphere, and integration into the regular classroom. (Contains 28 references.) (CR)

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Valuing, Identifying, Cultivating, and Rewarding Talents of Students From Special Populations

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In our society, which is far from uniform in its beliefs and values, reaching consensus regarding who is gifted is complicated, and identifying potentially gifted students can be ambiguous at best. The differences in cultural norms, languages, ethnic backgrounds, levels of education and income, and other differences, raise a number of issues with respect to what talents are valued, identified, cultivated, and rewarded.

The challenges of identifying gifted students from underrepresented or special populations is not new. For decades, issues were raised concerning the identification of gifted children from lower socioeconomic classes. Since World War II and especially since school desegregation, there has been a recognition that the traditional approaches to identifying gifted children have been inadequate and that the considerable talent potential among minority and economically disadvantaged students has gone undeveloped (Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995). Gifted children with disabling conditions are also underserved and underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Willard-Holt, 1994). Therefore, identifying and serving gifted students from racial and ethnic minority groups, economically disadvantaged students, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities is a priority in the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988.

This section focuses on the reasons for the underrepresentation of students from special populations in gifted and talented programs and the proposals to deal with improving this problem.

Cultural and Ethnic Groups

People who live in the inner city, in the barrio, or on the reservation need to know that their children are gifted. There's too much raw ability going through the cracks. If a child we might lose had the ability to cure cancer but ends up joining a gang or dealing dope, that's a double loss to the country. (Ryan, 1983)

Over the years, numerous writers have observed that gifted children can be found in every level of society and in every cultural and ethnic group (Clark, 1993; Ford, 1994; Renzulli, 1973; Torrance, 1977). Yet, identification of students with learning or physical disabilities and those from different cultural and ethnic groups has not been in balance with their numbers in the school population.

By far, underrepresentation of cultural and ethnic participation in programs for the gifted is most frequently attributed to biases in standardized testing (Bernal, 1980; Richert, 1987, 1991). Charges of test bias may stem from the testûs content and format, performance differences among groups, and the purposes for which the test results are used. However, there is some agreement (Anastasi, 1988; Kamphaus, 1993; Reynolds & Kaiser, 1990; Thorndike & Lohman, 1990) that there is little or no substantiating evidence in the claims of bias in most well-constructed modern tests of intelligence.

Charges of bias extend beyond the test's content and format. A number of others criticize the fact that testing instruments and practices developed in Euro-American tradition are invalid measures for other minority group children (Boykin, 1986; Hilliard, 1991). In any event, discussions and disagreements about test bias will continue as long as standardized tests remain a dominant part of assessment and identification.

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Another area of concern regarding assessment and identification of children from cultural and ethnic groups is in the referral process. It has long been recognized that minority students are simply not referred for programs for the gifted to the same extent as majority students. Factors contributing to the underreferral of these students are teacher attitude and the type of school these students are likely to attend (High & Udall, 1983). Research indicates that students, teachers, and school professionals continue to have low academic expectations for culturally and linguistically diverse students (Jones, 1988). With low expectations, teachers tend to overlook these students when making referrals for gifted program screening.

The traditional focus on deficiencies rather than on strengths is another reason for the low participation of students from cultural and ethnic groups in gifted programs. Since the 1950s and 1960s, with the emergence of school desegregation, civil rights activities, and the war on poverty, cultural deprivation became the driving theme for research. Identifying the knowledge, skill, and attitude deficiencies of ethnic students, and designing activities to eliminate or reduce them became the main focal points. This focus has made it difficult to recognize the strengths of these children, and has been criticized because it has diverted attention away from students who have achieved, despite the characteristics of cultural differences (Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995).

Physical and Learning Disabilities

A major portion of their time is often spent in remediation or learning to circumvent the effects of the disability. This concentration on the child's disability may preclude the recognition and development of cognitive abilities. (Karnes & Johnson, 1991)

Identification of students with specific physical disabilities can be problematic. Children whose speech and language are impaired cannot respond to tests requiring verbal responses. Children with limited mobility may be unable to take nonverbal or "performance" tests requiring hand manipulation. In addition, limited life experiences due to impaired mobility may artificially lower scores. Another problem is that gifted children try to compensate for their weaknesses, and children with disabilities often hide special abilities in order to fit in. This combination may cause them to appear closer to average in both areas (Hemmings, 1985), and be overlooked for placement in gifted programs.

Problems inherent in the identification of gifted students with learning disabilities can be grouped into four categories (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). The first has to do with stereotypical expectations about gifted children. Although most of the old images of the gifted child as a weakling wearing thick glasses are gone, stereotypes remain, such as, the gifted are always mature, self-directed, and well behaved in the regular classroom. The second category includes developmental delays. Some disabling conditions can produce delays in specific developmental abilities that are often used as indicators of giftedness. While developmental delays may hinder intellectual aptitude, they are not necessarily indicators of cognitive inability.

The third obstacle to identification includes incomplete information about the child which limits the view of the child's potential. Educators are usually not provided with detailed information about the characteristics of high ability students with learning disabilities. This may cause the classroom teacher to concentrate on disruptive behaviors and learning deficits instead of the child's talents (Cramond, 1995; Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1995).

The last category of obstacles to identification relates to existing programs for students with learning disabilities. In programs for children with learning disabilities, students are rarely provided with opportunities to display their talents. There is little information about enrichment programming for bright students with learning disabilities.

The problem of identification is further compounded by the absence of procedures to locate these students within most public schools. The identification of high ability students with learning disabilities is a rarity in school professional development programs, therefore, there is a general lack of awareness regarding the phenomenon of gifted students with learning disabilities (Boodoo, Bradley, Frontera, Pitts, & Wright, 1989).

Assessment and Identification Issues

Cultural and Ethnic Groups

The use of multiple criteria and nontraditional measures figures prominently in many of the proposals to improve the identification and consequent representation of gifted students from minority populations. (Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995)

Assessment issues related to the identification of gifted children from different cultural and ethnic groups highlight the difficulties with traditional methods in recognizing the talents of students from diverse groups (Callahan & McIntire, 1994). Various researchers have offered a range of possible ways of increasing effective identification procedures. They include: developing new data matrices; renorming or redesigning standardized tests; creating more authentic evaluation procedures such as portfolios or performance assessment; using objective and subjective data from multiple sources; extending the range of persons in the referral and nomination process, which involves creating enriched learning opportunities so students can demonstrate their abilities; adjusting cutoff scores and analyzing subtest scores differently; and developing culture-specific checklists and rating scales (Frasier, Garcia, & Passow, 1995; Lidz, 1991).

There are many difficulties inherent in these proposals. There are claims that some of these nontraditional, nondiscriminatory forms of assessment may actually provide invalid information (Hilliard, 1991). Others argue that "doctoring" measurement techniques by adding points stigmatizes these children, while failing to recognize their many gifts (Bernal, 1980). Lastly, summing scores from different tests, scales, and checklists is considered statistically inappropriate (Pendarvis, Howley, & Howley, 1990).

The long-standing debates related to the identification of talent potential among this population will, no doubt, continue for some time. There is no single new assessment procedure that will fix all the problems associated with assessment and identification of these children. Among the areas that research can profitably address are in the development of a consensus on the construct of giftedness and in the exploration of the value and validity of data from multiple sources.

Clearly, new models for identification that will include populations that have not been adequately identified are needed (Frasier & Passow, 1994). The promise is that educators will better understand how to identify and nurture talent potential among all learners.

Students With Physical and Learning Disabilities

Intellectually gifted individuals with specific learning disabilities are the most misjudged, misunderstood, and neglected segment of the student population and the community. (Whitmore & Maker, 1995)

There are three areas educators can address which relate to recognizing talent in students with physical and learning disabilities. They include: the difficulty in expressing and recognizing talent, the impact of the classroom atmosphere, and integration into the regular classroom (Cramond, 1995; Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1995; Willard- Holt, 1994). First, there are a variety of measures which may be used to assess the cognitive abilities of students with physical limitations. Standardized tests include the *Columbia Maturity Test, Detroit Test of Learning Aptitude-2*, and the *Stanford-Binet*--to name just a few. Certain adaptations and modifications may be necessary, not to make the test easier, but to make it possible for students to demonstrate their abilities.

The difficulty in recognizing indicators of giftedness may be reduced with informal measures such as observational checklists of characteristics of gifted children and those specific to gifted students with various disabilities. Recognizing and nurturing talents in children who are unable to speak is extremely difficult. These children cannot explain their thinking processes, respond to or ask questions, or display leadership abilities in conventional ways. They must rely on others or on mechanical devices to interpret for them.

The second area of focus involves the classroom. The classroom atmosphere, its structure, and the instructional activities offered greatly impact the intellectual development of gifted students with physical disabilities. A positive atmosphere, where students with physical abilities are respected, facilitates their development. Classes that are structured for individualization, advanced work, and an emphasis on achievement tend to be the best suited for these students. Hands-on activities such as science experiments and field trips are valuable in building tactile experiences not often encountered by students with physical disabilities.

The last area involves integration into the regular classroom. Gifted students with physical disabilities need a mainstreamed setting with opportunities to interact with nondisabled peers. Spending more time with nondisabled students helps them to learn adaptive behaviors more quickly. They also should be given access to gifted programs in their schools.

In addition, there are various measures to enhance the identification of students with specific learning disabilities other than those which are physical. A substantial amount has been published about various traits or characteristics which hamper the identification of high ability students with learning disabilities. Practitioners interested in this population have also identified positive characteristics which can aid educators and parents in recognizing the talents of these students (Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1995).

These lists of characteristics may help rid the stereotypes which still remain about the gifted child, and allow educators to look beyond disruptive behaviors and learning deficits, toward the talents the child may have. In order to do this, however, professional development programs are imperative for classroom teachers who often find it difficult to recognize giftedness in one area when the same student is having difficulties in other areas.

Finally, instructional strategies which avoid drill and practice, but provide special enrichment activities which develop creative abilities are a few of the many recommendations offered by experts interested in high ability students with learning disabilities. These recommendations are consistent with the overall recommendations offered by experts in the field of gifted and talented education (Baum, 1984). The key to addressing students with disabilities lies in getting beyond the specific disability while allowing the cognitive talents to blossom.

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